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ABSTRACT

The plays of stage director Robert Wilson are devices presenting alternative modes of perception to theatre audiences accustomed to verbal/aural structures of experience. Uniting his interests in the arts and therapy, his plays create a theatrical event promoting empathy with the perceptions of the mentally or physically handicapped and establishing them as valid artistic sources by incorporating the characteristics of deafness, autism, and mental instability. His "school" includes men and women, artists, children and elderly, and the mentally and physically handicapped, all of various races and cultures. His kind of theatre has proved therapeutic for both his actors and his audiences. Some have seen his work as an invitation to insanity, but the outcome for most of his audiences seems to be a heightened awareness of self and of others who were perhaps previously seen as totally distinct and unrelated to that sense of "self." Thus, one of Robert Wilson's major accomplishments is having created, through the use of such techniques as simultaneous stage activity, the absence or sparse use of sound, and manipulation of time, a theatre of images that offer the possibility of experiencing alternative modes of perception. By including those who have been limited to marginal participation in society as valid artistic sources and performers, the theatre may ultimately unleash a common reservoir of feeling and expression between such artists and their audiences. (HTH)

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Robert Wilson's Invitation to Insanity

Judith L. Stephens

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by Judith L. Stephens

This paper examines the theatre productions of Robert Wilson as communicative devices which provide new possibilities for human interaction. Through the use of such theatrical techniques as simultaneous stage activity, the absence or sparse use of sound, slow motion, and repetition, Wilson disrupts and then restructures his viewers' habitual modes of perception. The result is that the viewer can begin to transcend a communication barrier by sharing a sense of community with those who have traditionally been considered the accidental, the peripheral, or the perverse in human nature.

Robert Wilson's Invitation to Insantiy

by Judith L. Stephens

Although the term "post-modernism" has been used to describe contemporary culture, Ihab Hassen points out that, among scholars, no clear consensus about its meaning exists.[1] Both Hassen and Richard Schechner have devised contrasting word-lists in which terms such as logic, creation, and centering describe modern thought while indeterminacy, deconstruction and dispersal are used to suggest the post-modern experience.[2] While a general definition of post-modernism remains elusive, within the arts, the term seems to suggest a concern for new methods of perceiving, organizing, and presenting experience.[3] This concern with perception and presentation is reflected in the innovative theatre productions of Robert Wilson. Bonnie Marranca has stated that the significance of Wilson's theatre is its expansion of the audience's capacity to perceive.[4] This paper aims to examine Wilson's productions as devices through which alternate modes of perception were recognized, structured, and presented to a theatre audience.

In his "theatre" Robert Wilson creates a harmonious world which is characterized by the acceptance of diversity. Wilson and his performing group, Byrd Hoffman School for Byrds, have surmounted common barriers to communication such as age, race, sex, and culture.[5] In his "school" there are members of various races and cultures, men, women, artists, housewives, young children and the elderly, but one of the most innovative features of Wilson's theatre troupe is that it also includes the mentally and physically handicapped. Wilson's untraditional world of theatre is large enough to encompass those who have been, for the most part, limited to marginal participation in mainstream American culture. His theatre provides a medium through which the perceptions and expressions of the mentally and/or

physically disabled may enter the consciousness of the theatre going public. The question is, are American audiences ready to assimilate such ideas? Some individuals may be repelled by Wilson's work while others will be transformed.

Born 1941 in Waco, Texas, Wilson managed to pursue his interests in an artistic career while working with the mentally and physically handicapped. After graduation from high school, he became involved with young people's theatre and worked with brain damaged children by teaching classes in body movement and body awareness. Entering the University of Texas in 1959, his studies included theatre work with children in which they were encouraged to realease their own fantasies and imaginations. In 1962 he studied painting with George McNeil in Paris, and in 1965 received a BFA in Architecture from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, NY. While living in New York he worked as a special education instructor in the public schools where he continued his work with disturbed children. Wilson was also active in the New York avant-garde theatre of the 60s and received critical recognition as a designer for the original production of Jean-Claude van Itallie's America Hurrah![6] In his own stage productions, Wilson would eventually unite his interests in the arts and therapy to create a theatrical event which promotes empathy with the perceptions of the mentally and/or physically handicapped by establishing them as valid artistic sources.

In reviewing his productions, critics have detected such influences as Richard Wagner's visionary approach to the arts, the Surrealist's theatre of dreams, Samuel Beckett's disjointed lyricism, the mysticism of Zen Buddhism, the avant-garde theatre of the 1960s, and the semi-conscious blurred world of hallucinogenic drugs.[7] Wilson's insistence on divergent form also seems

to recall Gertrude Stein's innovative, experimental style and R. D. Laing's validation of the irrational.[8] Although Wilson has said his main interest is theatre, not human therapy, this paper focuses on the thereapeutic aspect of his work by asking what specific theatrical techniques were employed to promote audience awareness of alternate modes of perception.

During the workshops for his 1969 production, "The King of Spain," Wilson began to work with Raymond Andrews, a twelve-year-old, black, deaf mute who had never attended any type of school. Raymond was included in the pre-performance workshops where his deafness became an artistic contribution instead of a barrier. Recognizing Raymond's ability to "perceive and transmit through kinetic or kinesthetic awareness rather than discursive or verbal dialogue," Wilson had other members of his workshop imitate Raymond's movements and later, when he began to vocalize, his sounds. Drawing from his own experience in teaching the deaf, Wilson explained, "we usually impose a hearing world's language on a non-hearing person . . . through imitating what we do there is some understanding and in turn society could assume the responsibility in reverse and imitate what they do."[9] Thus, instead of attempting to change Raymond's mode of perception, Wilson seemed to be searching for a way to structure that perception for presentation to a theatre audience.

Raymond became both a performer and artistic collaborator in Wilson's unconventional theatre pieces. He "sang" during an intermission in "The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud" (1969), and a dance called the Raymond Movement was performed by a row of soldiers in "The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin" (1973), but the 1970/71 production of "Deafman Glance" stands as his

major contribution. This work was a product of Wilson and Raymond's relationship and during the first version, Raymond, an essentially detached, silent protagonist, was never off stage. The production was characterized by simultaneous yet unrelated stage activity which "mixed fantasy with reality, comedy with romance, and ordinary activities with bizarre ones."[10] For instance, at one point during the first act, workmen built a wooden structure while a giant frog observed from a distance, a red indian carrying a tomahawk stalked into the scene, a boy sat fishing, a waiter and waitress served at a long table and a magician was barely visible as he moved in and out of a background forest.[11] Raymond sat silently, separated from these events, sometimes watching them, and other times showing total disregard. Wilson has said that "Raymond was the deaf man. The play was really based on a series of images around Raymond, on Raymond's drawings, and on my thinking about him."[12] Instead of offering the audience the theatrical conventions of plot, character and discursive dialogue, "Deafman Glance" was a strange and haunting four hour visual spectacle offering its viewers a change in consciousness--an alternate mode of perception. Apparently audience members who were open to the experience were encouraged to change their ways of perceiving events and perhaps share in the consciousness of Raymond Andrews. French surrealist Louis Aragon, viewed the 1970 Paris production and wrote, "the world of the deaf child opened up to us like a wordless mouth. For more than four hours we went to inhabit this universe where, in the absence of words, of sounds, sixty people had no words except to move. . . it is at once life awake and the life of closed eyes. . . ."[13] Stefan Brecht, who viewed, then subsequently described in detail, the New York production (1971), also documents the emphasis on visual imagery and the absence or

sparse use of sound. His description notes the startling effect that spoken phrases and remarks produced when they emerged from the mostly non-verbal proceedings which included "emotionally colorless jabs at utterance," a violin and later a harp being played with no sound, and activities performed in various degrees of visibility.[14]

A paper maché ox, an image which re-occured in many of Raymond's drawings, was a dominant figure on the stage until its sacrificial beheading towards the end.[15] Light, color, and images, both grotesque and beautiful were used to create mood, atmosphere and sense-impressions. Margaret Croyden described the production as a three hour collage-epic composed entirely of silent sensory apparitions which, on one level, depicted Raymond's fantasy world, and on another expressed Wilson's attitudes toward religion, myth, memory, and folklore.[16] After seeing the Belgrade production of Deafman Glance, Eugene Ionesco said that Wilson's use of silence on the stage was "richer and more complex" than Samuel Beckett's because Wilson's silence was a silence that could speak," and what it spoke of was the metaphysical defeat of man.[17]

Although Raymond left Wilson's group in 1973 to attend a school for the deaf in New Jersey, "Deafman Glance" remains as a unique theatrical experience where visual imagery, dance, and movement became channels of communication between a theatre audience accustomed to verbal/aural structures of experience and a source accustomed to gradations of silence.

Christopher Knowles, clinically diagnosed as autistic, has been another collaborator/performer in Wilson's theatre. Like Raymond Andrews, Knowles also participated in workshops, where the other performers imitated his activities, and either appeared in or contributed material to productions

such as "The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin" (1973), "A Letter for Queen Victoria" (1974/1975), "The $ Value of Man" (1975) and "Einstein on the Beach" (1976). Christopher's autism furnished much of the artistic material for these productions and in 1980 Stanley Kauffman noted that Knowles had been Wilson's "chief collaborator" for the past six years.[18] Psychologist Barnard Rimland has suggested that autistic children display gross disturbances in communication because they are attuned to a degree of concentration so intense that few "normals" can ever achieve it.[19] He explains that autistics are "endowed with a capacity to deal with minute details in great specificity but only at the cost of not being aware of the background or context of the detail which, to the 'rational' brain, imbues it with relevance or meaning."[20] Rimland and Wilson seem to agree that these limited yet gifted people have much to teach society if society would only learn from them. Several Wilson productions incorporate autistic characteristics such as a ritualistic repetition of patterns and words, an intense focusing on the sharpness of images and details and disregard for "intellectual meaning" or abstract thought.

"The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin" created an atmosphere which disturbed the rational mind by encouraging the spectator to relinquish the hold of the intellect, with its search for meaning and relevancy, and to relax into a stasis--a continuous present--characterized by a focusing and de-focusing on seemingly incongruous events. The production lasted twelve hours, beginning at 7:00 p.m. and running until 7:00 a.m. the following morning. It thus became a singular event in the life of the spectator who had to change his or her "normal" routine in order to attend and who, during the twelve hours, was encouraged to doze on and off in his/her seat, viewing

events through various stages of sleeping, waking, or dreaming consciousness.[21]

Characteristic of other Wilson works, the production involved repetition of gestures played out in slow motion, multiple and unconnected actions occurring on several horizontal planes simultaneously, and visions such as dancer Andy DeGroat spinning non-stop on stage for forty minutes. Keith Mano's review describes a sequence in Act V which occurred about at 3:00 a.m.:

> "A Father Time figure starts center stage rear. He moves ahead quarter inch by quarter inch, repeating the same idiotic gesture sequence. It takes him fifty minutes to come forward. I watched him in a rigor of tension and annoyance. He reaches the stage lip. . . and- God, God, God, starts back at square one again. The realization is awful. Another fifty minutes. Step by step. Despair. The spirit is broken and something dies in your skull."[22]

It is difficult to understand Wilson's visual theatre apart from the productions since only descriptions of "Deafman Glance" and "The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin" are available. However, "A Letter for Queen Victoria" incorporates verbal language throughout and exists as a "literary" text.[23] Although obviously distinct from the production experience, a reading and solitary approach is now possible through the text. The words in "Queen Victoria" are used mainly for their sound, musical, or rhythmic value. Even visual appeal in the arrangement of words on the page takes precedence over "meaning" as the following page of dialogue between actors 1 and 2 shows.

2 We're
1 What are we doing
2 We're
1 What what
what what
what what
what what are we
what are we
what are we
what are we
what are we doing
2 We're doing "A Letter for Queen Victoria"
1 And you sit on the bench
2 And you wait for me
1 And you sit on the bench
2 And you wait for me
1 And you sit on the bench
2 And you wait for me
1 And you sit on the bench
2 And you wait for me
2 And you sit on the bench
1 And you wait for me
2 And you sit on the bench
1 And you wait for me
2 And you sit on the bench
1 And you wait for me
2 And you sit on the bench
1 And you wait for me
(1 and 2 simultaneously)
1 And wait for me and you wait for me and you wait for me till I come back
2 And you wait for me and wait for me and you wait for me when I come back
1 And you sit on the bench and you wait for me and you wait for me till I come back
2 And you sit on the bench and you wait for me and wait for me when I come back
1 OK
2 OK
1 OK
2 AOK
1 AO
2 O
1 OK OK
2 OK
1 OK
2 OK

(lights out)[24]

Bonnie Marranca describes this new stage language as "throwaway" or devoid of content and written in sophisticated perceptual codes which appeal to the senses instead of the intellect.[25] The style of writing is based on the compositions of Christopher Knowles in which he would begin with a single word in creating a pattern and carry it out to the end of the page before starting all over again:

MAD

VERY MAD

VERY VERY MAD

VERY VERY VERY MAD

VERY VERY VERY VERY MAD[26]

Thus, as Marranca points out, "autism is assigned an aesthetic value, it is not to be regarded as symptomatic of a disturbance but as a comprehensible phenomenon--Knowles' meaningful expression of himself in the world."[27] Words such as "spups", which Knowles developed as part of his own personal vocabulary during rehearsals for "Queen Victoria", appeared frequently throughout the play both in the dialogue and on painted backdrops. Knowles has continued to collaborate with Wilson in more recent productions such as, "Death and Destruction in Detroit (1979), and "Dialogue/Curious George" (1980). Herbert Blau notes that Wilson's theatre is unique in that the audience is asked to follow Christopher into his own territory and, as far as possible, think and behave like him, thus reversing "the normative path of therapeutic imitation, converting the singular dysfunction into a communal energy; an Archimedien point, from which the disadvantage is empowered"![28] Wilson shows us a way in which the marginal is made central.

Wilson productions have also included Cindy Lubar, who began to show

signs of a mental breakdown during the production, "Overture for Ka Mountain" (1972), which ran continuously for seven days and Francine Felgeirolles, a patient in a mental hospital whom Wilson recognized as "a remarkable performer."[29] No doubt there are many who would disapprove of Wilson's techniques. They may suspect a cruel side show atmosphere in his work or they may simply see it as tampering with an individual's mental stability and consider the risks too great—no matter how artistic or beautiful the effect might be. However, Wilson seems to believe that his work is beneficial to both his actors and his audience. According to Tomkins, Wilson is concerned about some of his actor's instabilities and the fact that others in the group often seem close to the edge mentally or emotionally. But at the same time, Wilson feels that it is important to "explore the kinds of communication that such states opened up."[30] Cindy Lubar not only survived her experience but expressed that experience in a work of Wilson's entitled "Overture" which ran for twenty-four hours.

If Wilson's particular type of theatre seems to be a form of therapy for his actors, some audience members have found it to be a therapeutic experience which almost defies description. After viewing Wilson's "Overture to Ka Mountain," Basil Langton said it was a personal revolution for him. Langton stated that he will "never again feel quite the same about anything."[31] Others have seen Wilson's work as an invitation to insanity. Nancy Moore, after viewing the twelve hour "Stalin" play, wrote in Dance Magazine that the "problem with this work and with the people watching it is that you don't get tired from staying awake too long so much as from fighting off your own growing inclination to be just as absurd and illogical as Wilson's stage. . . . If it wasn't safely up on stage, you'd be shocked

into oblivion (or Nirvana)."[32] Finally, D. Keith Mano writing in The National Review admitted that he felt inarticulate, stunned and excited after viewing Wilson's work and yet he suggests that everyone could profit from an extended session with Robert Wilson--but he was quick to add, "just one."[33]

Wilson's company also includes people with nine to five jobs who, other than their connection with Wilson's company, probably lead very ordinary lives. His theatre encompasses the verbal and non-verbal, the rational and the irrational. There seems to be much structure and much freedom. Wilson himself has described theatre as "organized insanity" and while some may label it "The Theatre of Madness," Jerome Robbins has suggested that "maybe Wilson's work is saner than anything else around."[34] Most importantly for the spectators, the outcome seems to be a heightened awareness of self and of others who were perhaps previously seen as totally distinct and unrelated to that sense of "self." If shared perception (common experience) facilitates communication, the theatre of Robert Wilson has opened new channels of interaction for performers as well as spectators. There seems to be a powerful experience in store for those members of the audience who are willing to open themselves to it. Leo Bersani sees Wilson's theatre as characteristic of contemporary works of art which break down or shatter the traditional understanding of the human self as a stable, logically structured whole. However, through retraining his viewers' perceptual habits, Wilson's theatre seems to be encouraging a larger, more encompassing, ever expanding sense of SELF which can include that which has traditionally be considered "the accidental, the peripheral, or the perverse in human nature."[35] Perhaps reaching this new sense of community will be Wilson's most lasting

contribution. Perhaps this is what makes his type of theatre "saner than anything else around." Unfortunately in recent years, Wilson has found more receptive audiences and financial support in Europe, working in Peter Setin's experimental German theatre.[36] What was to be his most recent American production entitled "Great Day In The Morning: An Evening of American Negro Spirituals," scheduled for November 1982, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, was cancelled.

Thus, one of Robert Wilson's major accomplishments is that through the use of such techniques as simultaneous stage activity, the absence or sparse use of sound, and manipulation of time, he created a theatre of images which offered the possibility of experiencing alternate modes of perception. If he has reached only a small portion of the public he has at least started to scratch away at what once was thought to be an impenetrable wall. By including those who have been limited to marginal participation in society as valid artistic sources and performers, the theatre may ultimately unleash a common reservoir of feeling and expression between such artists and their audiences. Then the small trickle, initiated by Wilson, may turn into a rushing torrent and suddenly the dam will burst.

Endnotes

1. Ihab Hassen, "The Question of Post-modernism," Performing Arts Journal, VI, 1, (1981), p. 30.
2. Hassen, p. 34; and Richard Schechner, "The End of Humanism," Performing Arts Journal, IV, 1, (1979), p. 13.
3. Schechner, pp. 11-14, and Richard Falk, "Post-modernism: The Social Aspect," Performing Arts Journal, V, 3, (1980), p. 58.
4. Bonnie Marranca, The Theatre of Images, New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1977, p. xv.
5. Founded in New York City by Wilson in 1969, The Byrd Hoffman School for Byrds is name for Mrs. Byrd Hoffman, a dance teacher who helped cure Wilson of a severe speech impediment when he was 17.
6. Extended biographical information is found in Stefan Brecht, The Theatre of Visions: Robert Wilson, Germany: Suhrkamp Verlag Frankfurt am Main, 1978; John Rockwell, "Robert Wilson's Stage Works: Originality and Influence," Robert Wilson: From a Theatre of Images, Exhibition Catalogue, The Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, 1980, pp. 12-39; and Calvin Tomkins, "Profiles: Robert Wilson," New York Yorker, 13 January, 1975, pp. 38-62.
7. Rockwell, pp. 13-22; Margaret Croyden, Lunatics, Lovers and Poets, New York: McGraw Hill, 1974, pp. 211-219; and Bonnie Marranca, The Theatre of Images, New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1977, pp. x-xv and 39-48.
8. Gertrude Stein, Four Saints in Three Acts, in Selected Operas and Plays of Gertrude Stein, ed. John Malcolm Brinnin, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970, pp. 41-86 and R. D. Laing, The Politics of Experience, New York: Pantheon Books, 1967.

9. Robert Wilson, "Production Notes on 'The King of Spain'" New American Plays, New York: Hill and Wang, 1970, p. 244, and Bill Simmer, "Robert Wilson and Therapy," Drama Review, March, 1976, p. 101.

10. Croyden, p. 213.

11. Brecht, pp. 58-61.

12. Tomkins, p. 52 and Brecht's interview with Wilson in Brecht, pp. 428-432.

13. Louis Aragon, "An Open Letter to Andre Breton from Louis Aragon on Robert Wilson's Deafman Glance," trans. Linda Moses and Jean-Paul Lavergne, Performing Arts Journal, Spring 1976, p. 4.

14. "Deafman Glance," in Brecht, pp. 54-83.

15. Brecht, p. 79.

16. Croyden, p. 212.

17. Croyden, p. 219.

18. Stanley Kauffman, "Interpretations and Images," Saturday Review, August, 1980, pp. 78-79.

19. Barnard Rimland, "Inside the Mind of the Autistic Savant," Psychology Today, August 1978, pp. 69-80, and "Autism as Cognitive Dysfunction" in Rimland's Infantile Autism, New York: Appleton Century Crofts, 1964, pp. 79-92.

20. Rimland, "Inside the Mind of the Autistic Savant," p. 79.

21. Frantisek Deak, "Robert Wilson," Drama Review, June 1974, pp. 67-80.

22. Keith Mano, "Epic Tedium," National Review, 1 Feb., 1974, p. 144.

23. A Letter for Queen Victoria had its premiere on June 15, 1974 in Spolleto, Italy at the Festival of Two Worlds. The production opened on Broadway at the A.N.T.A. Theatre on March 22, 1975. The complete text is in Marranca, pp. 37-50.

24. Robert Wilson, "A Letter for Queen Victoria," in Marranca, p. 72.

25. Marranca, pp. XIV and XV.

26. Robert Wilson, "Preface to Queen Victoria," in Marranca, p. 48.

27. Marranca, p. 44.

28. Herbert Blau, Blooded Thought: Occasions of Theatre, New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982, p. 45.

29. Tomkins, p. 58.

30. Tomkins, p. 46.

31. Basil Langton, "Journey to Ka Mountain," Drama Review, June 1973, p. 54.

32. Nancy Moore, "Robert Wilson and the Twelve Hour Jog," Dance Magazine, Feb. 1974, p. 36.

33. Mano, p. 143.

34. Tomkins, p. 58.

35. Leo Bersani, A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature, Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1976, p. 276.

36. Ellen Stewart, "Ellen Stewart and La Mama," Drama Review, June 1980, p. 20, and David Sterritt "The Next Wave Will Shake up Conventional Ideas of What Art is All About," Christian Science Monitor, Sept. 27. 1982, p. 15.